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Local Schools Give Youth Workers More Class

Low cost, easy access make community colleges ideal for staff training.

By Martha Nichols

Catonsville, Md. – Assistant Professor Lisa Boone raps a finger on the papers in her hand, the picture of an overbearing adult – even though she's leading a classroom of adults. "Does it work," she asks her 15 students, "if you're standing over a child with a clipboard, saying, 'Where do you like to go when you're upset?' "

They shake their heads. They talk about lowering their bodies to the child's height. They take notes from a PowerPoint presentation. Some sprawl in their chairs, but considering that this is a three-hour afternoon class in a windowless room, they're focused and alert.

They are the first students in a new youth worker certificate program at a community college – the kind of initiative that could be one of the most realistic ways to boost the education and quality of youth workers nationwide.

The program at the Community College of Baltimore County (CCBC) joins a slowly growing roster of youth-work certificate programs at community colleges that have popped up since 2000 in places like Chicago, San Diego, Kansas City, Mo.,

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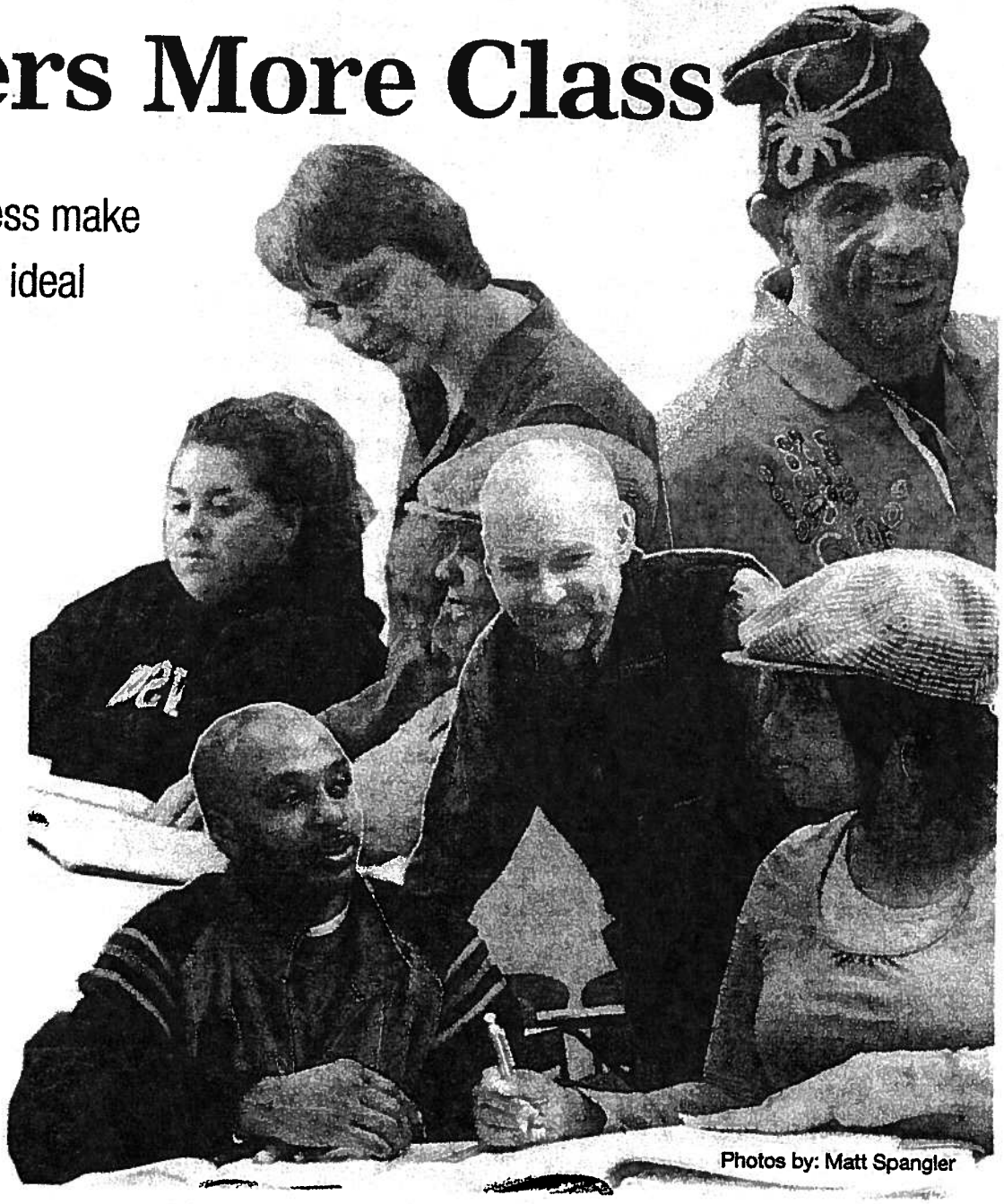

Photos by: Matt Spangler

Community of Learning: Youth workers and teachers (standing) gather for a new class at Baltimore County Community College.

Community Colleges, of Course

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and Hampton, Va.

That's good news for the profession, say advocates of youth worker training. With their flexibility and low cost, community colleges are more accessible and less daunting than four-year schools – especially for "nontraditional students," such as youths who struggled through high school and adults launching new careers. They provide training for those already on the job and a pipeline to recruit new youth workers – two things agency managers and staffers say the field desperately needs.

A community-college model "seems philosophically, financially and professionally the appropriate place to start," contends Michael Heathfield, former coordinator of training programs at the Chicago Area Project and now coordinator of social work and youth work programs at the city's Harold Washington College.

"If you start at a B.A. or master's level" with education programs, Heathfield says, "you're going to make it very difficult for people to get there."

So why aren't youth-work programs more common at community colleges? First, there is the need to convince college administrators that students will show up. Filling seats is a mantra for higher-education bureaucrats. Will poorly paid youth workers pony up the cash to fill classroom seats?

Then there's the fact that few program planners talk to one another, even about the most promising curricula or best practices. Many of the certificate programs are unknown beyond their own neighborhoods. Few of the organizations angling to create certificate or degree programs in youth work communicate beyond the borders of their college campuses, let alone across state lines.

The lack of communication is familiar: American youth work is littered with isolated programs, information silos and good ideas that don't get widely shared.

The central lesson here is that it takes buy-in from other partners – be they youth-serving agencies, trade associations or churches – to get community college programs off the ground. Certificate programs like those of Harold Washington College and CCBC show how it's done.

Getting on Campus

Although CCBC at Catonsville is set on a bucolic hill west of Baltimore proper, its 1960s' concrete-block architecture and vast parking lots give it the uninspiring look that is typical of community colleges. But it's the word "community" that highlights their primary virtue: They're everywhere. The American Association of Community Colleges estimates the number nationally at about 1,600, including branch campuses.

For decades, they've also been sites for work-force training, with certificate programs for various professions that are pushed (and often subsidized) by local employers. Take Harold Washington in Chicago, which offers certificates in food sanitation, digital multimedia, accounting – and, in recent years, youth work.

Community colleges rarely drive new programs by themselves, but they are open to creative funding schemes. The Child and Youth Care Practitioner Certificate Program at CCBC would have been a glimmer in nobody's eye without the Maryland Association of Resources for Families and Youth (MARFY). Through a serendipitous connection – a CCBC dean served on the board of the nearby Children's Home, one of MARFY's 50-plus member agencies – a link was forged between the state trade association and the college.

The CCBC program came together in under a year – hyperspeed compared with curriculum development at four-year colleges. "We had sticky notes all over the room," recalls Heidi Holland, MARFY's deputy director of training and work force development, describing a two-day session with a curriculum facilitator.

MARFY seeded the certificate program last year with an $85,000 grant. Even though the first class – "Introduction to the Field of Child and Youth Care" – began last fall, the program officially launches this year.

MARFY recruits students for the classes from member agencies, whose membership fees help support the program.

Agencies Launch Courses

In other places, local youth-serving organizations have initiated the college programs. One key: helping to pull in students, especially with a curriculum that has already been test-driven.

For example, the Career Studies Certificate in Youth Development at Thomas Nelson Community College in Hampton, Va., was created in 2001 by the college and Alternatives Inc., a youth-development agency. Alternatives designed two core courses for the certificate program and still provides its staffers to teach them.

The program is based on the Advancing Youth Development (AYD) curriculum, which the Academy for Educational Development began in the 1990s. Alternatives has also contracted with the Virginia Baptist Mission Board to teach its youth-development classes to ministers around the state.

In Chicago, the venerable Chicago Area Project (a pilot site for AYD) has built several tiers of youth-work certificates. If a youth-serving program receives city money, Heathfield notes, employees are required to attend AYD training through the project; the city underwrites it. In turn, the project recruits students from its AYD training programs for the Harold Washington College certificate programs.

Providing a college with various forms of aid – such as curriculum, staff and administrative back-up – is the most realistic way to get on campus. In 2002, the Chicago Area Project began offering youth development classes at another campus of the city college system, for which students earned no college credit. By 2003, students could earn credit at Harold Washington College for those classes. The agency handles registration, recruitment and evaluation of the youth work program for the college, and subsidizes student tuition.

Students can now work toward a Basic Certificate in Social Work, Youth Work (15 credit hours), an advanced certificate (30 credit hours) or an associate's degree (60 credit hours). At CCBC Catonsville, the certificate requires 24 credit hours.

Whether front-line workers need an advanced degree instead of a certificate is hotly debated. "You need a range of stepping-off points," Heathfield says. "You can't treat students like this coherent block of people" with the same educational goals, "because they're not."

If You Pay, They'll Go

Youth work is filled with the kind of nontraditional students that attend community colleges. In the middle of a November day at CCBC Catonsville, an even mix of minority and white students flows through the cafeteria and bookstore. The average age of community college students is 29, according to the community college association. At Catonsville, however, most appear to be in their late teens or early 20s, decked in do-rags, low-slung jeans and nascent beards.

There's potential here for recruiting 19-year-olds who've never walked through a youth agency's door. At Catonsville, the introductory course will open this spring to a few hand-picked students from what Professor Boone calls the "general population" of the college's Human Services Program.

But training and retaining current youth workers is the primary objective. The fall class at Catonsville had 31 students enrolled in two sessions. The 15 on hand in November ranged in age from their 20s to 40s; most were African-American. Boone and her co-instructor, Kevin Mick, are middle-aged whites – she with short blonde hair and glasses, he with a salt-and-pepper beard.

(Boone says the turnout is usually about 70 percent, as students miss classes because of work or other training. Twenty-five of the 31 students completed the course.)

What Youth Workers Get from College Classes

"The vast majority of them [youth workers] want to be good at what they do," says Veronica Ortega Welch, who co-directs the San Diego BEST Initiative and is a faculty member at San Diego City College. "They so thrive on getting together with others in the field."

Following are some comments from students in the fall course at the Community College of Baltimore County in Catonsville, which were made in person and through an evaluation that asked about "the most useful piece of information" from the class:

"The new guidelines for how we handle the clients and restraints."

"The reporting child abuse/neglect was very important. I went back to my agency and asked questions about this."

"Trust and boundaries."

"Learning about different things agencies do that are different from where I work."

"The communications session, particularly the different types of nonverbal communication a teen uses."

"The most useful would be the section on communication. Many things can happen as a result of poor communication. Hearing some of my classmates' stories made this section the most useful."

"A lot of times, I look at what I do from the small perspective as a direct-care provider. But I've learned a lot about seeing youths' perspectives through their eyes."

"All of it."

At an average cost of $250 or less per three-credit class, a good chunk of tuition in community college programs is often covered by a worker's agency, financial aid or a nonprofit partner. Whether youth workers would pay for such classes on their own is an open question. All the students in the Catonsville class came from MARFY member agencies, and all but one had the tuition paid by their agencies. Several students made clear they wouldn't attend "if my agency didn't tell me to."

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Exchanging Experiences: Christina Rahley, standing, of Arrow Project Crossroads, talks with fellow students.

As with those at youth-work certificate programs around the country, many here believe a certificate will lead to better pay or to promotions.

The students also point to intangible benefits. "Knowledge is never a waste," says Kelly Cave, a residential counselor at the Arrow Project in Baltimore. "It's great to be in a room with people who do what I do."

"I've learned to be a better employee from this one class," says student Stratton Clark. "We're hitting some topics that are very real to what we do in our daily activities: burn-out, turnover rate."

A retired corrections officer, Clark is now a mental health specialist at the Woodbourne Center in Baltimore, a residential treatment facility for adolescent boys. He works in the sexual offenders unit.

Clark sees the class as a stepping-stone to a bachelor's degree in the field (he earned a bachelor's degree in business administration in 1982) and possibly a master's. "A lot of my classmates are around my age," Clark says, "so they must be there for more reason than pay."

Not Sharing

No one knows the exact number of youth work certificate programs at U.S. community colleges. Compared with the national requirements and credentialing of Great Britain, Australia and Canada, the United States is like the Wild West. Most U.S. programs have been around for only a few years. They go by different names and are housed in various academic departments.

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Thinking Cap: Tyrone Jones of Our House weighs in.

Most, however, have similar requirements. Full-time students can finish in a year, although many take longer to get a certificate.

Some see a growing incentive to create more such programs. Partly because of MARFY's dogged advocacy, Maryland is set to become what the association says is the first state to require certification of all youth workers in residential settings. Pending legislative approval this year, a CCBC certificate or equivalent degree will allow youth workers to sit for a qualifying exam, which they must pass by 2013. That could affect 10,000 workers statewide, according to Boone and Holland at MARFY.

"If Maryland can do it, then Ohio will follow," says Chip Bonsutto, president of the Association for Child and Youth Care Practice, and a veteran of legislative efforts to create youth work certification in Ohio.

But while the planners of community college programs could learn from each other, there is little information-sharing among them. Take the Catonsville CCBC program, which plans to create eight new courses from scratch. (Two are completed.) In comparison, Thomas Nelson Community College and San Diego City College offer two AYD-derived youth work courses and fill in the rest of the certificate package with existing college classes.

Asked if she'd heard of the AYD curriculum and its community-college spin-offs, Professor Boone at Catonsville said no. Neither had MARFY Executive Director Jim McComb, a gray eminence in the legislative battle over standards for youth workers in Maryland.

"I'm a little bit territorial about the child and youth-care program," Boone acknowledges. "But the last thing I want to be doing is recreating the wheel."

Some national organizations seem to be treading the same path, laboriously researching and culling the core competencies of youth work. A partial roll call: the National Youth Employment Coalition, National Collaborative on Workforce and Disability for Youth, Next Generation Youth Work Coalition, Child and Youth Care Certification Board, and American Humanics.

All that fermenting is fine, but the need for a broad consensus remains, as well as for a foundation to bring everyone together. "There's nothing unusual about what we offer here," says Jerry Kitzi of the youth-work certificate programs in the Metropolitan Community College system of Kansas City, Mo.

Kitzi, director of the Francis Child Development Institute at the college's Penn Valley campus, adds that moving toward national standards "will help get youth work up where it needs to be." But "like any new innovative idea, foundations haven't leapt in yet."

Even the AYD curriculum is still under the radar, admits Elaine Johnson, who directs an institute within the Academy for Educational Development that supports the academy's BEST Initiative (Building Exemplary Systems for Training Youth Workers). She says four BEST organizations have community-college partnerships, and "that's very small when you think there are over 27 communities offering AYD trainings."

This lack of interaction is one reason that Heathfield of Chicago and Pam Garza of the Next Generation Youth Work Coalition recently organized the Higher Education Learning Group, a committee of key players from around the country. The group plans to track and map all youth-work certificate programs.

"The people doing this work are starving to talk to each other," Garza says.

Youth workers may be the hungriest of all. During the November class, Boone asks her students, "How many of you have kids where this is their first holiday out of their home?"

Hands shoot up. One student tells of a young client whose father died a week earlier. The others lean closer, offering their own stories and advice.

They learn from each other.

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